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SUBJECT: WORKING WITH RUSSIA TO STABILIZE AFGHANISTAN

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Classified By: Ambassador John Beyrle for for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The February 10 interagency consultations led by SCA DAS Moon should launch a sustained effort to engage Russia on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia that reduces the zero-sum nature of U.S.-Russian relations in the region and increases the chances of our success in Afghanistan. We should test the Russian proposition that Afghanistan is a missed strategic opportunity in our relationship, while not underestimating the neuralgia in both Moscow and Kabul that will make this engagement complicated. We believe intensified consultations are necessary to rebuild Russian support for our military presence in Central Asia. Practical cooperation could produce an expanded transit agreement, delivery of long-promised assistance to the Afghan National Army, sustained Russian military airlift, infrastructure investment, and improved counternarcotics coordination. Encouraging the SCO's engagement on Afghanistan and selectively participating in CSTO counternarcotics efforts could partially undercut Russian complaints over the "zero-sum" nature of our presence in the region. Fundamental disconnects will continue to plague Moscow-Kabul relations, with Moscow continuing to curry favor with the Northern Alliance and talking a better game than it will fund. However, building the habit of dialogue and consultation is an essential first step in reducing suspicions of U.S. motives. Visits by S/E Holbrooke and General Petraeus would allow us to reinforce this message at senior political-military levels, and expand the dialogue to Pakistan, which remains a Russian preoccupation. End Summary.

Testing Russian Overtures

[1](#)2. (C) The upcoming February 10-11 bilateral consultations on Afghanistan in Moscow led by SCA DAS Moon should be the beginning of a sustained effort to expand consultations with Russia on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia that aims to reduce the zero-sum nature of our relations in Central Asia (ref A) and increase the possibility of success in Afghanistan. Despite understandable neuralgia in Kabul over its former occupier, it is in our interest to engage Russia on Afghanistan, recognizing that Moscow has the power to complicate or even undermine OEF and ISAF efforts. The good news is that Russia is seeking to use the February consultations to elevate cooperation on a number of fronts, including providing weapons to the Afghan National Army (ANA), intensifying counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics cooperation, and promoting economic development.

[1](#)3. (C) Now is the time to test Russian overtures on Afghanistan. Russia has signaled that it views Afghanistan as a missed strategic opportunity between the U.S. and Russia. Privately, President Medvedev has conveyed his readiness for cooperation on Afghanistan directly to the

President, building on his January visit to Uzbekistan, where he expressed public support for the Obama Administration's intent to increase troop strength and redouble efforts to stabilize the country. Ignoring the bait provided by Uzbek President Karimov's comments that Americans were becoming occupiers in a failed war, Medvedev stressed that Russia was ready for "full-fledged and equal" cooperation with the U.S. He specifically identified the NATO transit agreement as one element of cooperation and called for an international conference to coordinate aid to Kabul, with Moscow using its chairmanship of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization this year to host a March conference focused entirely on Afghanistan. Likewise, FM Lavrov has stressed publicly that Afghanistan should figure more prominently on the bilateral agenda, with Russian PermRep to NATO Rogozin trumpeting the renewal of low-level NATO-Russia Council consultations as a first step towards a more intensified focus on Afghanistan.

What Russia Can Offer

14. (C) As the graveyard of the Soviet Union, Afghanistan looms large in the Russian political and popular consciousness, and the Russian leadership must overcome a fair measure of its own "Vietnam Syndrome" to think rationally about how best to prosecute its interests. As much as average Russians would like to wash their hands of Afghanistan entirely, Russian policymakers understand that geographic proximity, historical commonality, and economic interdependence with Central Asia make the region a soft underbelly through which Afghanistan's narcotics, extremist ideology, and instability flows. Even a hardliner like

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Russia's NATO PermRep Rogozin recently described to a national radio audience the negative consequences for Russian security interests that would ensue from a NATO "defeat" in Afghanistan.

15. (C) We believe that new efforts to engage Russia at a senior level on Afghanistan could help:

-- Build Consensus on a U.S. Presence in Central Asia: The more we work with Russia, the harder it is for Russian critics to portray the war in Afghanistan as a zero-sum effort to undermine Moscow, and the easier we make it for our Central Asian partners to justify and expand their cooperation, either bilaterally, through NATO, or in multilateral efforts, including the OSCE. Russian support for a U.S. military presence in Central Asia post-9/11 is eroding, as suspicions grow that the U.S. seeks a permanent military presence aimed at encircling Russia and undermining its "privileged relations" with former Soviet republics. Policy ruptures over NATO enlargement, missile defense, and Georgia have made it easier for officials, particularly in the military and security apparatus, to question Russia's continued support for Manas airbase.

-- Broaden the Transit Agreement: The April 2008 NATO transit agreement for non-lethal equipment was a positive first step, but we should aim to expand it to cover lethal military equipment, including for OEF, which the Germans and French have negotiated on a bilateral basis. Russian agreement to expand transit (and acquiescence in the transit of military equipment through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) will help off-set the unreliability of supplying Afghanistan via Pakistan and could potentially reduce shipping costs from Europe by 90 percent (ref b).

-- Increase Afghan Military Assistance: The GOR has proposed providing military assistance to the ANA in the form of \$200 million worth of weapons, vehicles and other reportedly quality material that the Soviet-equipped ANA would find useful. The U.S. has taken the GOR up on this offer and provided a list of specific Russian weapons and equipment needed by the ANA. Delivery has been complicated by mutual

misunderstandings in Moscow, Washington, and Kabul, which we hope will be cleared up during the February consultations in Moscow. While the GOR will donate most of the \$200 million worth of material to the ANA, it is also interested in the possibility of weapons sales. Our willingness to selectively waive sanctions on military sales (as we already do for MI-17's in Iraq and Afghanistan), which could be triggered by U.S.-origin assistance monies funding Afghan defense purchases, would send a strong signal of the priority we attach to building regional support for Afghanistan's security and give us greater leverage in pushing Russia to issue licenses for the deployment of Warsaw Pact equipment from new Allies.

-- Sustain Russian Military Air Lift: Ukrainian and Russian-owned aircraft continue to provide airlift for ISAF contributors, and Russia did not pull these contracts in retaliation for sanctions reimposed on Rosoboronexport in December 2008. While air lift and commercially provided Russian fuel supplies take place largely under the radar, they are essential to ISAF efforts and should remain a foundation stone of our cooperation.

-- Encourage Infrastructure Rehabilitation: The GOR has offered to lend Russian expertise to the rehabilitation of Soviet-era infrastructure, including dams, electric generating and irrigation systems, and the Salang Tunnel. Russian firms with experience gained during the construction of these facilities would carry out the work, although the GOR has not offered to provide funding. USAID has developed a list of projects in which Russian assistance would be most useful.

-- Improve Counter-narcotics Cooperation: Russia is especially vulnerable to the damage done by narcotics originating in Afghanistan, and the GOR claims to be eager to work with countries in the region to address trafficking. INL and DEA are skeptical of Russian ability in this area, and question the effectiveness of the CSTO's counter-narcotics program, Operation Channel. We can push Russia to sign on to the UNODC's Central Asia Regional Coordination Center project, as well as respond to numerous leads provided by DEA. Disagreements have restricted counter-narcotics cooperation, with Russia pushing the CSTO to take the lead at the same that Moscow's long-standing ambivalence towards OSCE involvement in the region has led it to oppose the organization conducting training for Afghan and Central Asian officials in Afghanistan. The GOR is keen to

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use its Domodedovo training facility in Moscow, and will look to us to persuade the Afghans to make full use of this resource. The February consultations and additional meetings need to focus on making our counter-narcotics cooperation with Russia and the Central Asian states more effective, including finding the means to enhance the abilities of regional law enforcement agencies.

What Stumblingblocks Loom

16. (C) Russia is never an easy partner and while our interests in Afghanistan overlap, they do not wholly coincide. We can anticipate continued policy friction, including over:

-- Collective Security Treaty Organization: Moscow will press for the U.S. and NATO to work with the CSTO on Central Asian security and regional counter-narcotics efforts, and it is unclear whether engagement with the (non-Russian dominated) Shanghai Cooperation Organization will give Russia the legitimacy it seeks for "made-in-the-Kremlin" regional organizations. Russia interprets our preference for coordinating within NATO and OSCE structures as evidence of a zero-sum game, in which Euro-Atlantic institutions prevail over regional organizations. Engaging with the SCO and

selectively participating in CSTO-sponsored counternarcotics programs, for instance, may provide sufficient diplomatic cover for Russia to remove its objections to stalled OSCE initiatives on border security. While the CSTO did not endorse Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it provided more robust support for Russia's invasion of Georgia than the China-tempered SCO. We believe it is difficult, but not impossible, to thread the needle of distancing CSTO as a military counterpart, while seeking ways to improve its regional counter-narcotics projects.

-- Ethnic politics: The GOR has maintained lines of communication with Russia's traditional allies, the Northern Alliance, intending it to serve as a buffer between the Taliban and Central Asia should Afghanistan once again fall to the extremists. While the MFA affirms the importance of a strong Kabul, and bemoans Karzai's weakness as a leader for all Afghans, the temptation will remain to play ethnic politics. This certainly influences Russia's approach to delisting Taliban under UNSCR 1267, with Russia suspicious of the criteria being used and the absence of a permanent ban on the return of former extremists to political power.

-- Russian/Afghan/U.S. Disconnects: No reliable channel of communication appears to exist between Russia and Kabul, with Russia expecting a level of diplomatic solicitude that is unrealistic from a nation that remembers its one million war dead. Well-intentioned initiatives go unimplemented by Moscow and Kabul, with Russia blaming the U.S. for sowing mistrust of Russian intentions within the Karzai government and advocating against the use of Russian arms. The MFA has also accused "foreign advisors" in Kabul of convincing the Karzai government not to send officials to Moscow for planned counter-narcotics training at the GOR's Domodedovo training facility. In both instances, despite U.S. protestations to the contrary, evidence emerged to support Russian claims. Concentrated effort will be required to overcome such missteps, to convince the GOR that we are serious about regional cooperation, and to broker effective communication between Moscow and Kabul.

-- Outsized Ambitions: Russia talks a better game than it has been willing to fund. The economic crisis will continue to hit Russia hard, with the leadership focused on maintaining political stability in an authoritarian system that has been predicated on constantly rising living standards. With South Ossetia and Abkhazia two new sinkholes for Russian spending, and with the Kremlin committed to working with the Central Asian states to alleviate the financial crisis, we can expect little in the way of ramped up assistance for Afghanistan.

Next Steps

17. (C) We look forward to hosting DAS Moon and his interagency delegation, to better assess how can we break down artificial barriers to cooperation on Afghanistan, while better managing the tensions that accompany the U.S. military presence in the region. Instilling the habits of consultation and dialogue is a first step towards chipping away at the zero-sum calculus that has corroded Russian support for our efforts to defeat the Taliban and secure Afghanistan. Assuming a serious reception and constructive dialogue on February 10, we endorse U.S. attendance at the

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March SCO conference. Visits to Moscow by General Petraeus and Special Envoy Holbrooke will allow us to reinforce our message at senior political-military levels and broaden the discussion to Pakistan, which continues to preoccupy Russian policymakers worried about instability in the nuclear-armed state.

BEYRLE